

MEDIASCAN TRANSCRIPT
PBS MACNEIL-LEHRER REPORT
27 July 1983
Wednesday

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: We're not planning a war, and we don't think they're, that that's going to happen at all.

MACNEIL: The contrast between President Reagan's soft words and his military muscle-flexing sharpens the debate about where he's headed in Central America.

MACNEIL: Good evening. Whatever its impact on the American public, President Reagan's assurance last night that he seeks peace in Central America did not silence his critics in Congress. In fact, his televised news conference appeared to fan the flames of debate. A parade of high-level Democrats attacked the president's statements. House Speaker O'Neill said Mr. Reagan was playing with matches. Major Leader Jim Wright said the sea and land maneuvers the president has ordered around Nicaragua marked a return to gunboat diplomacy. The criticisms were echoed in hours of heated debate today as the House of Representatives moved towards a vote tomorrow on cutting off covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels. One of the points that fueled new controversy was the president's assertion that the planned maneuvers were routine.

REAGAN: And let me set the record straight on what these exercises are and what they are not. Essentially, there will be two sets of practice training in coming months: One, a series of ground exercises in Honduras with the combined forces of Honduras and the United States; second, a series of ocean exercises with our own fleet. The latest exercises with Honduras took place earlier this year. Much larger scale exercises have taken place in Europe, Asia and Latin America. There is no comparison with Vietnam, and there's not going to be anything of that kind in this. And maybe the people are disturbed because the confused pattern of, that has been presented to them and the constant drumbeat with regard to the fact that, of suspicion that somehow there is an ulterior purpose in this.

MACNEIL: Tonight, what do the exercises say about Mr. Reagan's intentions in Central America, and will the Congress support them? Jim Lehrer is off tonight. Charlayne Hunter-Gault is in Washington. Charlayne?

HUNTER-GAULT: Robin, routine or not, the military exercises planned for Central America are definitely large-scale. The land, sea and air maneuvers which started Monday when the first aircraft carrier arrived in Central American waters will last until the end of the year. In Operation Big Pine, the administration plans to have some 4,000 soldiers aid the Honduran military in communications training, small patrols and artillery operations. At sea, the aircraft carrier Ranger was diverted from a planned cruise in the western Pacific. It carries over 70 aircraft and travels with a battle group that includes seven other ships. It will reportedly be joined in the Pacific by another battle group led by the reactivated battleship New Jersey, now off Southeast Asia. Press reports from the Pentagon indicate that the U.S.S. Coral Sea, now stationed with the Mediterranean fleet, will take up station along the Caribbean coast off Honduras. The naval task forces will simulate a blockade, or quarantine, off Nicaragua, but the administration says the fleet will remain well out to sea, in international waters. For a look at the implications of these military exercises, we talk first with retired Admiral Stansfield Turner, former CIA director. Admiral Turner has commanded carrier task forces in the South Atlantic and Mediterranean oceans. (sic) Admiral, are these maneuvers routine? TURNER: Not in my book, Charlayne. There's, these are unprecedented in size for Central America. Two

MEDIASCAN - PBS MacNeil/Lehrer 07/27/83

& 40

carrier task forces and a battleship task force is really a major display of U.S. might.

HUNTER-GAULT: Are they a good idea? TURNER: Well, the president has, I believe, a good idea in that he's taking a very firm initiative here. He's not letting the events drag him into this. He's leading the country, leading the people in what he thinks is the right policy for Central America. I happen to think it's a dangerous policy and is likely to lead into greater and greater involvement.

HUNTER-GAULT: You mean war? TURNER: I'm not sure war, but I think it's likely to lead to more and more commitment, money, men, forces in that area.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right. The Navy says they're going to be practicing a blockade without getting into too much detail. What does that entail? Is that a big deal, a big operation? TURNER: What you have to do is set up a patrol sector in order to see to it that you can detect any ship, or even boat, trying to go through the water into the country you're blockading, in this case Nicaragua. So, to practice it, you would go out and set up various ships on station and see how well their radar and other detection devices could let you know if somebody tried to sneak through. The big problem is, what will you do if a ship tries to come through? Will you shoot a Russian ship? Will you actually sink a French ship or such if they try to run your blockade?

HUNTER-GAULT: And you think that could happen possibly during these practice maneuvers? TURNER: Oh, not during the practice ones, only if the United States gave a declaration of a blockade. You certainly wouldn't shoot and stop somebody unless you had warned them that they should not be doing that.

HUNTER-GAULT: Right. Do you see, as some other critics of the, of the president's moves right in through here, do you see a Vietnam analogy here? TURNER: Well, the big difference is that I think we got dragged into Vietnam step-by-step. In this case, the president has made a very definite declaration. And I admire his forthrightness and his taking the initiative and said, 'I'm going to take a very tough policy toward Central America.' My concern is that, first, the American public may not support that. Secondly, it may not work, and thirdly, I think it's going to detract attention from much more important issues of foreign policy that are on our horizon.

HUNTER-GAULT: Well, what exactly do these exercises say to you about President Reagan's intentions? TURNER: I think they say that he really is not going to let another country go Marxist in Central America. He believes he can stop that. I'm not sure he can, and therefore, he's giving the country a big commitment here. We're going to look very bad if we don't succeed.

HUNTER-GAULT: All right. Thank you. Robin?

MACNEIL: For another view, we turn to retired Brigadier General\Theodore\Mataxis, a combat officer in World War II, Korea and Vietnam and assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the early '60s. General Mataxis is now assistant superintendent and commandant of cadets at Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania. Gen. Mataxis, Admiral Turner says as much as he admires the president's exhibition of strengths, he feels that these, these moves are dangerous and could possibly lead to greater and greater commitment. What is your view of it? MATAXIS: Well, I think the admiral and I agree 100% on admiring the president for his moves.

MEDIASCAN - PBS MacNeil/Lehrer 07/27/83

& 41

Now, where we differ is, the admiral feels it may lead us down the road to more trouble. But on the other hand, if we did nothing and watched the country topple, Nicaragua has gone, Honduras is under pressure from guerrillas supplied from Nicaragua with the arms from Cuba and Russia. So, I think it is best for the president to take a stand at this time and let the people know what he intends to do and show his hand in Central America. I differ on the possibility of shooting at a French ship or any other ships going through. The pronouncements from the Pentagon have been very clear that we will not do that. And I'm sure the admiral remembers in the early '60s where we sat at the end of the cables and listened to what was going on in the Caribbean, where the ships were monitored step-by-step. Now, this is not....

MACNEIL: During the Cuban missile crisis? MATAXIS: During the Cuban missiles crisis. This doesn't even approach that.

MACNEIL: Now, let's go to the exercises themselves. The admiral says they aren't routine. In fact, they're unprecedented in size for Central American. MATAXIS: Well, it could be true, right, for Central America, but the Caribbean area, we've run many maneuvers into...(inaudible)...of, ah, as far as the Army goes, parachute infantry. I took a brigade in there back in the late '60s, and we run maneuvers, a series of maneuvers out of the Atlantic command into the area. Off the Caribbean coast, yes, they're larger than normal, but I think this is part of the president's plan. As the admiral said, he's taken steps. Now, how do you back up the steps you've taken? You show some of your military muscle and say, 'I intend to do something.'

MACNEIL: What do you see as the purpose of these maneuvers? MATAXIS: I would say the purpose of the maneuvers are, like you're in a certain confrontation here that we have said we're going to do this. We want you to stop sending arms into Central America, into Nicaragua, into El Salvador so that the people have a chance down there for democracy and vote, as they did vote in El Salvador. The guerrillas' bands are tearing this up. We said we will not stand for this. We're sending advisers to help the El Salvadoran troops in training them, and I think this gives us another card that we're playing the naval power and the naval air power that we have, to show what we do have in the area and back up what the president's saying.

MACNEIL: What happens if the maneuvers go on for the length of time projected for them and the Sandinistas haven't changed any of their behavior and all that U.S. prestige has been laid on the line and the ante's been upped that far, what happens then? MATAXIS: That's a question the president and the National Security Council are gonna have to ask, to answer. However, I would pose the question, if we did nothing now wouldn't we be in much worse shape than taking some action, which hopefully will bring them to the, to negotiations table?

MACNEIL: Well, let's put that question to Admiral Turner. What, what's your answer to that question, Admiral? TURNER: My answer is that there are other things that we can and should be doing now. Particularly, trying to strengthen Mexico and Panama so that they aren't subject to what's called the domino theory. And you can't be close to Mexico and Panama and have the appearance of trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua and replace it with supporters of former dictator Somoza, or give the impression that many people have today that we're building up towards a return to the 1920s when we sent U.S. Marines right into Central America. That is alienating us from the countries that are really important to us down there. Nicaragua and El Salvador are relatively unimportant to the United States. Mexico and Panama are critical. We must keep them in mind when we set our policy for Nicaragua and El

MEDIASCAN - PBS MacNeil/Lehrer 07/27/83

& 42

Salvador.

MACNEIL: Do you have a comment on that, General? MATAXIS: Well, I think this is where we differ. I hate going back to fall-back positions. I would prefer, if we see a confrontation coming down the road and a problem, I think it's best to meet it in a forward position rather than fall back. And I hope that this new commission the president has started is going to concentrate on economic matters, because I agree with the admiral on that. Mexico and Panama, there is a problem there. There's a problem through the whole Caribbean, and we must get back down to the people on the ground to make sure that they have a better livelihood.

MACNEIL: Admiral, you mentioned a moment ago you wondered whether the president could get the support of the American people for this policy. Does it concern you that there seemed to be a lot of people within the government who have some misgivings? Because all the details of the maneuvers were leaked to the press well in advance of any planned announcement? TURNER: Yes, the United States military learned its lesson in Vietnam, Robin, and it doesn't want to get out in front, if the American public is not going to be supportive. I think that we have over the years found it very difficult to keep American governmental or public interest focused on Central America. It's just not an issue or an area of high concern and hasn't been for over 50 years. I don't think we're going to be able to bring the American public to understand why we're supporting guerrillas in Nicaragua and fighting guerrillas in El Salvador, for instance. It's very difficult.

MACNEIL: General? MATAXIS: I agree. That is a very difficult problem. As I rode down to Washington the other day to a presidential conference that he had for an outreach group, I was listening to the radio. On one side they mentioned the damage being done by the guerrillas to Nicaragua. Then, they talked about El Salvador, and I thought we'd have a balanced reporting there, they'd talk about what the guerrillas were doing in El Salvador. But no, they talked about the atrocities of the government troops, and that was one of the things the president covered at this outreach group. He's having a hard time getting through the media blocks, this Chicken Little approach, where we're running circles, screaming and yelling, 'the sky is falling.' I think the president has been voted in as a leader for us. And at this time, it's up to him to take the moves as you said you admire him for, taking these very moves. He should take these moves. I believe that's part of a leader, taking the moves and seeing what happens down the road rather than just waiting and letting things happen to us.

MACNEIL: Can I just ask you, do you agree with Admiral Turner that the American military is very leary about getting out in front of public opinion in a situation like this? MATAXIS: This has been, been noted in the newspapers and so forth. They have talked and said they don't wanna get out ahead of the public. But they are talking through the National Security Council and so forth, not something like I saw in the paper where some majors and colonels go into the senators' and representatives' office and tell them they think this is a bad thing. I personally think that's, that's absolutely atrocious and horrible.

MACNEIL: Well, we'll move on. Charlayne?

HUNTER-GAULT: As Robin said earlier, members of the House of Representatives spent the afternoon arguing about the administration's efforts to provide covert aid to the contras, the anti-Sandinista guerrillas fighting the leftist government of Nicaragua. Specifically, the focus is on the Boland-Zablocki amendment, which would prohibit

MEDIASCAN - PBS MacNeil/Lehrer 07/27/83

& 43

secret aid to the contras. Here is an excerpt of this afternoon's heated debate.

REP. WILLIAM BROOMFIELD (R-Mich.): I sometimes think that if Cuban troops landed in Miami, there would be some in Washington whose first reaction would be to call for negotiation to save Georgia.

REP. WYCHE FOWLER (D-Ga.): If you want preventive action, as we all do, if we want to eliminate hostile influences in our hemisphere, if we want to contain communism, for goodness sakes cannot we do it with our allies in our hemisphere, who are pleading with us, pleading with us to cease this military interventionism?

REP. HENRY J. HYDE (R-Ill.): You know, so much liberal guilt permeates this chamber, it would seem to me that we ought to feel guilty not helping the Mosquito Indians resist the genocide. And, you know, ignorance is salvagable, but stupid is forever. Why grant, why grant a sanctuary, why grant a sanctuary to the communist exporters of subversion in Nicaragua? Why not make them pay a price for what they're doing?

REP. LEE HAMILTON (D-Ind.): What has the covert action achieved? It's brought about greater Cuban and Soviet involvement in Nicaragua; more Cuban troops; it's increased the risks of active Cuban military intervention; it's driven the Nicaraguans ever more deeply into the arms of the Cubans and the Soviets; it's increased the risk of a full-scale war between Nicaragua against Honduras, and perhaps Costa Rica.

REP. DAVE MCCURDY (D-Okla.): Sure, we want to apply pressure on the Sandinistas. Sure we want a peaceful solution. But what is our policy towards Central America? We don't know. We hear contradictory claims. Many of us are just plain fed-up with the confusion coming out of the State Department and the White House on Central American policy. Only when we develop a policy that is clearly stated, that is clearly defined, can we stop short of direct intervention.

HUNTER-GAULT: The Senate has also been closely monitoring the Central American policy arguments. For the flavor of that discussion we talk with the Senate Majority Whip Ted Stevens, Republican from Alaska, and a leading Democratic critic, Sen. Christopher Dodd, of Connecticut. Senators, starting with you Sen. Stevens, how important is tomorrow's vote? STEVENS: In the House?

HUNTER-GAULT: Yes, sir. STEVENS: Well, I think it's quite significant, and I, I assume that the administration will win that vote.

HUNTER-GAULT: You agree with that? DODD: I hear that they are doing better--the administration may prevail.

HUNTER-GAULT: If the administration prevails in, in the House, what do you think's going to happen in the Senate? DODD: Well, I would have guessed in the Senate that the administration would prevail. Just the numbers alone. The, the majority party is the Republican Party, the president's party, and it would appear from some earlier votes that, that is the way it would go. Last year we had a similar amendment offered on the Boland language which failed in the Senate, and I would guess the mood hasn't changed substantially. I would add, quickly, I think it's, it's unwise. I wish it would prevail in the House. I wish the Senate would also see the wisdom of supporting the Boland-Zablocki language. I think it's far more in our interest to, to have that covert activity cease and get about the business of supporting our allies--the Contadora Group that has suggested an alternative way to bring peace and stability to the region.

HUNTER-GAULT: But you think you're going to lose this one? DODD: It would appear the vote count is that way.

HUNTER-GAULT: If the administration wins this one as you see, as you are saying, you think they will, does this now give the president carte blanche in Central America? STEVENS: No way. In no way. The president has not sought carte blanche in Central America. He's, he's presented his plan. I held a hearing this morning with the defense subcommittee on the plans of the administration in Central America as far as these, these covert activities are concerned. I, I really don't think that anyone can say this is a carte blanche. It's a well-defined moderated, it's... As a matter of fact, there's not a step up of activity in this plan for this year as compared to last year, and I think it's being blown way out of proportion.

HUNTER-GAULT: Senator, how do you see it? DODD: Well, I, my good friend Ted and I will disagree on this. There's been virtually no consultation with Congress at all. Foreign Relations Committees of both the House and the Senate have little or no contact on the basic policy at all. We have seen an escalation, a clear escalation of activity. And the issue of covert activity has never been clearly defined. We were told only a few months ago this was going to interdict the flow of arms coming from Nicaragua to El Salvador. That is central to the issue of Nicaragua. It is central to the issue of El Salvador, and the evidence has never been presented. Secondly, we've seen the clear movement, moving up of advisers, the numbers. We've seen the moving up of, of, now this, these exercises they're called in the region, which are far beyond routine. The president called them routine last night--they're not routine at all. It's a clear escalation right at the very hour that our allies in the region, the Venezuelans, the Columbians, the Mexicans, and the Panamanians, have said to us there's a better way to bring peace and stability and protect your interest and ours if you'll follow it.

HUNTER-GAULT: Clear escalation, Senator? STEVENS: No. These, these maneuvers started in 1965. My gosh, Stan, you were there when President Carter had them in '79 and '80. They've just had two battleship groups, two aircraft carrier groups, off my state in Alaska up in the north Pacific--similar kind of maneuvers, of same strength by the way, Stan, off Alaska in the last year.

HUNTER-GAULT I think the point that the admiral, the admiral made, was that this was the first time that you've had maneuvers of this magnitude in that region. STEVENS: The magnitude's not there yet. As a matter of fact, the magnitude, I hope, will be there, because I think it's time for us to show our intent and the priority we place on Central America. If there's anything I disagree with, what's been said so far by Sen. Dodd and, and Admiral Turner, is the priority we place on Central America. It is extremely important, I think, to our nation to make the world understand the importance of our central relations, Central America relationship and the priority we place on that. And this, this maneuver, it's the same... By the way, the maneuvers of the 4,000 troops not any different from February. The difference is, the fleet maneuvers this year are larger. They're still routine. They've been going on now, as I said, since 1965. I think, again, the people who want to criticize the president and start the campaign 16 months ahead of time are doing it. And it's a difficult thing when we're conducting foreign policy. We have not done that in the past as far as the president's... I remember when President Carter announced the Persian Gulf doctrine. We didn't agree with it, but we didn't carp at it. We didn't make it a political issue. DODD: Unlike the Panama Canal treaties...

HUNTER-GAULT: Well, let me just ask you this Senators, starting with you, Sen. Dodd. Why is the president having such a hard time gaining a consensus? DODD: There's just total confusion. And let me tell you something--I asked the State Department, the Defense Department, the Library of Congress today whether or not these exercises were routine. All three departments said absolutely not. These are not routine exercises at all. In '65, the (inaudible) exercises virtually went around a couple of destroyers and maybe an oiler for each country in the region around there. And you can ask the former secretaries of the Navy whether or not that's the case. This is not routine.

HUNTER-GAULT: Well, is this confusion on the size of the maneuvers or... DODD: You can't come out and say we support the Contadora Group, say that and then do exactly the opposite of what our allies are suggesting. We are racheting up very slowly, just as we did in Vietnam, we are racheting up slowly a military escalation in this area without knowing where it's taking us. What happens tomorrow if the Nicaraguans come into Honduras? Are we going to go down and defend them if they go in and try and get rid of the guerrillas? I don't think we've asked ourselves those questions.

HUNTER-GAULT: Very briefly, Senator. STEVENS: The comparison to Vietnam is not true. As a matter of fact, President Johnson put us into Vietnam after a, a slow build-up of involvement in a military way. We are not in a Vietnam. It's clear. Anyone that compares us to Vietnam is doing a disservice to the country and to what we're trying to do to demonstrate the importance of this area to our nation's future.

HUNTER-GAULT: Robin?

MACNEIL: Let me go back to the two military men first. Admiral Turner, do you see any danger because of the presence of the 3,000 to 4,000 troops in Honduras, of them becoming embroiled in active fighting because the situation is different now? TURNER: I don't think that is a major problem at the moment, Robin. I think they will stay away from the, the battlefield. The problem will arise, as Charlayne maybe suggested a second ago, if the Nicaraguans should take the offensive against Honduras and our people are there, we're almost going to be obligated to come to their assistance.

MACNEIL: What do you see as the danger of American troops becoming embroiled--even though these are only exercises? MATAXIS: Well, I would say with the command and control we have today that, and the orders down the line that they would be able to break and move back if they had to, it's do their best, that the president's given orders not to become embroiled, they won't become embroiled. They may take a few casualties if something happens, but the troops will not be embroiled if they're given orders not to.

MACNEIL: Senator Dodd, do you have a view on this? DODD: Well, I, I'm intrigued because the, the 3,00 to 4,000 troops that we're placing down there, I've been told in the last several days that, in fact, there'll be a significant, significant segment of activity occur in a community called Choluteca, which is only 10 to 15 miles from the Nicaraguan border. Now that's provocation--you're just looking for trouble when you do that kind of a thing. That isn't just a military exercise, that's lighting a match in a, in a, in a, an arms depot. You are provoking activity and a response, and I think we can get ourselves in trouble--unnecessarily.

MACNEIL: Senator Stevens? STEVENS: No way. I don't think that's going to happen, Robert. I, I firmly believe that this... Had we canceled these maneuvers, they were. This is the follow-on as far as the troops are concerned to the activities that took

MEDIASCAN - PBS MacNeil/Lehrer 07/27/83

& 46

place in February. They've been taking place every year for a series of years with Honduras, and with other governments in terms of the rest of the world, particularly in Central America and South America. I think it would have caused the reverse feeling that we're abandoning the, the area at the time of their great need. Honduras is under pressure. These people will not be involved in any war. There's not a war going on with Honduras now. I don't understand this conversation. There, there is an insurrection going on in El Salvador. There are people in Nicaragua feeding the guerrillas arms and we're, we're involved in covert operations trying to stop those. These maneuvers are not involved in the covert activities at all.

MACNEIL: Senator, sorry, Admiral Turner? TURNER: Well, I think the important thing to keep in mind here is that we have, no matter how you look at these individual activities, an aggregation of activities that is a major increase in our commitment to Central America. First, these several kinds of build-up of military power in the area. Secondly, what is probably the largest CIA covert action since Vietnam. Thirdly, the appointment of one of our very senior diplomats, Dr. Kissinger, to try to study this situation, to come up with a new solution. Next, the building of a \$150 million military base in Honduras. Next, the request from the president for hundreds of millions of dollars of economic aid for the area. Put together, this is a dynamic new program. It's a very strident offensive one--that's what bothers people like Senator Dodd and myself, I believe.

MACNEIL; Do you have a final word, General Mataxis? MATAXIS: Well, I think it is a dynamic new program. That's what we need is some action from the president as a leader. As the admiral mentioned, a lot of this is economic aid. The economic aid is to go to the population to try and help them with the infrastructure, build the infrastructure that they have down there. And one of the problems, as the president mentioned on the other day on Wednesday, that what he's trying to do is get a climate down there so democracy can flourish. They've had an election in El Salvador. They haven't had one in Nicaragua, and we want to make sure that we can keep it that way.

MACNEIL: All right. Well, thank you Admiral Turner, Senator Stevens, Senator Dodd, thank you for joining us in Washington. General Mataxis in New York. Good night, Charlayne.

HUNTER-GAULT: Good night, Robin.

MACNEIL: That is all for tonight. We'll be back tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil, good night.

L'Yana Batts and Lareda Smith, Transcribers